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1140

The Vision of Dry Bones.

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BY JOHN CENNICK.



- “The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear shall live. John v. 25.
“He that believeth shall live though he was dead.”
John xi. 25.

EZEK. xxxvii. 14.

I will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.

WHOEVER reads the Bible must observe that God used similitudes, types, and parables when he spake by the prophets; many instances of this kind we find in Ezekiel especially, to whom, more than to other holy men, God delighted to manifest his mind in his way, and to shew visions.

At that time it was more necessary than now to liken and compare the case of the church, and of the kingdom of heaven to temporal things for their sakes who heard the word, because then the veil was upon the true sanctuary, and the doctrine of the fall, and of salvation by our Saviour's death, was not spoken of plainly, as since the New Testament has been of force.

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Thus

Thus when the Lord would shew Jeremiah, that the same God who made the world would redeem it, he brings him to the house of a potter, and lets him see the potter finish his vessel upon the wheel, which was spoiled in his hands; and then he did not in his anger throw it away, and take a fresh piece of clay, but new moulded that which was marred, and made of it a good vessel, as it pleased him. Then came the word of God to the prophet, saying, "Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hands so are ye in my hands, saith the Lord." By this means we are taught, that God is the great potter, and we are his clay. When he made man, sin marred the vessel in his hands, but he would not cast us utterly aside, nor withdraw his everlasting arms from underneath us; we were kept still in his hands, spoiled and ruined as we were, till the Creator bowed the heavens and came down in our likeness, and with his own blood he softens our hardened and spoiled nature, and begins in the new-birth a new creation, and this he carries on till all things are made new; and in that day when all old things pass away, and time shall be no longer, every soul shall know, that God who made all things, and for whose pleasure they are and were created, is author and Lord of all, and our Saviour.

In like manner, when the Lord would shew Ezekiel the estate of his church, he brought him in the spirit, and set him in a valley full of dry bones, and caused him to pass by them, and go round about and view them, and lo! "they were very many and very dry." When the man of God had been shewn all this in a vision, the Lord asked, to try him, "Can these bones live?" and he answered, "Lord thou knowest;" and the Lord said to him, "These bones are my people;" they are now in a low and
dead

dead estate, and they have no more hope that I will deliver them, than that the dry bones shall live, but I have spoken it, and I will perform it ; I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of them, and I will bring you into the land of Israel ; then shall ye know that I am the Lord, when I have brought ye up out of your graves, O my people, and shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live.

In this vision three things are typified, First, the deliverance of the captive Israelites. Secondly, the salvation from the dead state of nature by Christ, And, Thirdly, the last resurrection, which shall be effected through the same divine hand of our only " Lord Jesus, who can subdue all things to himself," and raise up all that innumerable company who have slept in the graves, and who are now returned to dust, and scattered and dispersed far and near.

I shall not here speak of the temporal deliverances of Israel, nor of the resurrection, but of our lost and dead condition by nature, and of our salvation, and rising again to a new life, through the grace and Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ. This I will do when I speak of the text more immediately, and now will make a few observations on the vision.

I look upon it as one of the liveliest similitudes in the scriptures, and from whence a minister and servant of Jesus may learn many excellent lessons, and indeed all others also who would be wise to salvation.

By the valley we may understand this lower world, and by the bones all the whole race of mankind ; for such is our state since the fall, and dry bones can as soon understand the things of God as we by nature, and as dead and dry as the bones,

and as unlikely to live, so are we, and shall never be otherwise but by an immediate work of almighty God.

Thus has the Holy One compared our state, and thus we are in his eyes, therefore he brings his servant to see a valley full of bones, and bids him walk round about, and go through, and observe them narrowly, and he says, "behold they were very dry."

When a true servant and minister of the gospel would describe the condition of lost mankind, he must so describe it, as dead and helpless, even as dry bones; and neither can he compare unregenerate men to any thing better, nor the societies of christians with all their best forms and orders, who enjoy not Christ in them; they, like all others, are dead, and like the house of Israel in Ezekiel's time.

When God asked Ezekiel if he thought the bones could live? he answered modestly, Lord, thou knowest; as if he would have said, to all outward appearance, and according to all human thoughts, they cannot live, but thou knowest, thou art God, and canst do what thou wilt in heaven and earth, to thee all things are possible. Should a minister, or any awakened soul, take a view of our natural state, make a narrow search into the depth of our misery and sinfulness; or be led by the Holy Ghost to see how far we are gone from God, and how sunk into the arms of satan, he would scarce make any other answer than this, Except Almighty God be their Saviour, except the Creator and Lord of all be their Saviour, they cannot be saved, they must die for ever. The scripture observes of the bones, that they were very dry, to signify the very barren and lifeless nature we are possessed of, and yet directs

rects Ezekiel to prophecy or preach to them. Had he measured the word of God by the rules of human wisdom, or resolved, as too many ministers do, to believe and teach nothing but what they can comprehend, nor do any thing without being able to account for their manner of acting, reasonably, then he must have replied, Lord, to what purpose shall I preach to dead men and dry bones? But he did not do so, he behaved as an obedient child, and did as his heavenly Father bid him. Such ministers only does our Saviour use. For of what service is the vessel that is not passive? Or to what purpose are ministers sent to preach the word of God, who are determined to be led by their carnal reason, the philosophy of the schools, and the wisdom of men, since all the doctrines of Christ are against such, and teach us, that it was by such wisdom the world knew not God! A true minister of Jesus Christ believes his word, and teaches it, he follows his dear Master, and chuses rather his reproach, he bears the sneers and insults of cruel men, is content to be deemed a fool and mad, rather than please men and not be the servant of Christ.

Had any seen Ezekiel preaching to the bones, no doubt they had mocked and derided him. We know how we should have behaved once, if we had seen one calling to the dead in a church-yard or burying-ground, we should have pitied such a one, and thought he was beside himself, or laughed at his folly and credulity. Just so carnal men, who hear the doctrine of original sin, and how all are dead in Adam, and left powerless and unable to do any thing to the attaining salvation, mock and jeer the preachers who call to such to come to Christ; but let them mock on, our Saviour has sent us on the ground,

errand, and bids us preach to the dry bones, and we will do it. He will stand by us to the end of the world, and what we speak in the ear, he will write upon the heart. That minister would be to blame who could think it was his preaching, labours, or arguments which awaken souls, or inspires them with life: He might preach and pray till the day of judgment, and not win one soul to our Saviour of himself.

When the disciples had been fishing, and toiling, and rowing all night by themselves, they took nothing, all their labour was in vain: but when Jesus came to them and bid them cast their net into the sea, at his word they did so, and strait filled their net that it was ready to break, and all their boats were full of fishes, so that they began to sink; so must such think who would be fishers of men. Dear Saviour, I know I may speak till I die, and toil in a dark night all my days, and catch nothing, but speak thou the word, be thou only with me, and vouchsafe to own my labours, do you give me my words and light, and lead and send me, and I shall prosper, else I beat the air, and deliver dead preaching to dead men, and they and I deceive our own souls."

Thus Moses, the meek prophet, when he was bid to go with the people, while God made as though he would not go, answered, "If thou goest not then will I not go." He knew he should lead them in vain, and be unprosperous in all he should undertake, without the good Shepherd's presence; but when his glory moved before the camp, then he could go cheerfully after, and when the Lord spoke to him he willingly told all the words before the people.

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When we preach it must be so with us. Let us not rush into the ministry unsent, nor carelessly speak to the souls under our care, but be first well acquainted with our own hearts and with our Master, and when we have felt our own sad condition, and have found redemption in his blood and wounds; when we have been truly awakened, and have experienced our lost sinful state, and found Christ crucified, and obtained pardon of him, and lived in real fellowship with him, we may then speak boldly, preaching that we know, and testifying that we have seen; and as Moses spoke from the presence of Jehovah to the people, and all heard and felt the power of God, so shall it be with us who speak out of a warm heart, whereon our Saviour's blood has spoke peace, the people who hear us shall feel whose word we speak, and know whose servants we are. Our gospel shall not come in words only but in power, in the Holy Ghost, in much assurance, and in faith unfeigned, while we, like sowers, go on and sow in season and out of season, not knowing if this or that may prosper, or as prophesying to dry bones, leaving it over to him that sent us to make them hear and live. Ministers who so act, and who so believe, learn to prize as an inestimable treasure, the Holy Scriptures, which are the words of God, and having been taught therein by the chief Minister, they shall not need to come barren or empty handed to the congregation, but be like scribes instructed in the kingdom of God, who bring out of their treasures things new and old, to alarm, awaken, comfort, and encourage men till they have laid hold on eternal life, and entered into the harvest-supper, where the sowers and reapers rejoice together for ever.

But

But to return : As soon as Ezekiel had begun to preach, " there was a noise and a shaking among the bones, and the bones came together, every bone to his bone." As soon as a servant of our Saviour enters a land, or city, or house, and delivers with faithful simplicity the doctrine of Christ, immediately there is a noise. The souls that were dead in sin, and asleep in a lost and unsafe estate, awake and cry for mercy; they found the same solemn alarm in the ears of others, and a noise of weeping and mourning for him whom they have pierced, comes up before the throne.

There is also a noise in the world ; some when they have heard the gospel blaze it abroad far and near, and are for inviting and calling all to Jesus : Thus it was with the woman of Samaria, she no sooner found the Messiah, but runs to call all in Sychar of her townsmen and neighbours to come and see him. This often causes a stir in a city, or village, or family, and is the means God often uses to awake the dead, and rouse them who are asleep in sin, and at ease in Sion.

There is beside a greater noise in the world ; for generally when a soul is bent for salvation, and his face is turned to our Saviour in earnest, and he with tears enquires his way to heaven, his friends, or relations, or old companions, or all together, strive to hinder him; the serious thinks he goes too far, and need not be so concerned, and the careless and the light-minded part laugh at and oppose him with all their might; they make a noise indeed, some cry out, he is seduced and led into errors and heresy, or are afraid he should leave his church or first religion (though perhaps that was none at all) or should renounce his baptism, or deny his faith. Others report he is
distracted,

distracted, mad, and beside himself. Others tempt and allure him back with great subtilty, promises, and offers, or court him into his former company, pleasures, and diversions; while yet others follow with cruel threatnings, slanders without number, mockings, revilings, &c. The father disowns his child, the relations change all love into bitter reproaches and hatred, the mother is against her daughter, and daughter against the mother, and nothing is heard round about but a storm, and a tempest, and persecution, and blasphemy on every side: and wherefore? Because one is turned a drunkard, a whoremonger, a stage-player, a thief, a murderer, a rebel? O no, but only because he is resolved to be Jesus Christ's disciple. Thus it has always been, and will continue to be so till Jesus comes the second time, and then it will cease for ever. This made our Saviour say, "that he who could not leave all for his sake was not worthy of him;" and with this he comforted his people, "They have hated me, and they will hate you, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

But besides all the noise made in the world, and in the house of our friends, there is a noise among the devils, for all rise up to hinder and trouble a newly awakened soul. Satan knows there is danger of his losing his slaves, and rages horribly. He strives with temptations, hurries, frights, and terrors to oblige the poor sinner who seeks mercy, to leave off and quit his search, nor ceases to assail the defenceless weak heart, till he has found a refuge in the wounds of a crucified Saviour, and then there is a noise through all the heavens, of harpers harping on their harps, and of the shoutings and hallelujahs of the angels and blessed spirits, at
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the return of a sinner to the Lord. Jesus himself is the author of this joy, by telling them, "Let us be glad and make merry, for this your brother was dead, but is alive again, he was lost, and is found."

This noise of joy properly begins when a sinner repents, but at that time he knows little of it ; on the contrary he hears only the noise of the enemy, who crieth after him, the noise of a guilty heart, and of a clamorous and false world ; but he shall hereafter hear " the noise of them that keep holy-day ;" himself shall sing for joy and clap his hands, and leap for very gladness of heart.

Ezekiel observes farther, that " there was a shaking among the bones," as well as a noise, to signify how the convinced heart trembles at the word of God. They are shook from all their false and deceitful hopes, from their sandy foundations and fallacious pleas ; they feel themselves ready to perish, and are as if God shook them over hell. Their heart aches and sinks within them, their faltering lips can scarce speak plain, or utter any thing but broken sighs, and short, but piercing prayers for mercy, and their poor knees are smiting together. Are any who hear me thus ? O turn ye to that dear man who once went trembling into the garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood as he went, and crying out of the bitterness of his soul. He only knows your disease and what you want. He alone can sympathize truly with you, and help and ease you. Turn to that Jesus whose flesh and whose heart shook and trembled because of the Lord's judgments, and he will give you a rest to your souls. Apply to that good Physician, and you will find him mighty to save.

This

This is the way by which all happy souls have escaped; when loaded and oppressed with guilt and fear they have fled to a bleeding, groaning, and agonizing Lord, and found refuge from the avenger of blood. All the noise and opposition made in the world, or in hell, has not hindered them; their threatenings and promises, their smiles and frowns, were treated with like indifference by the sincere souls, nothing swayed or drew them like Christ Jesus.

They were deeply and sensibly convinced of the danger they were in without a Saviour: they felt his words with invincible power, and having heard how God loved the world, that he once became like a lamb in their stead, and drank up, like a cup of wormwood and gall, the bitter wrath they had deserved, and at last died in hellish anguish to save them alive; and this made their hearts bleed and shudder, nor did they, nor could they rest, till his small still voice within had silenced their fears and miseries, and made them feel his everlasting love and mercy.

Who never in his life was thus concerned about his salvation, who never was in any distress for mercy, or saw amazed his sinful state, nor was forced to cry out for the blood and help of Jesus as one ready to perish, who never was thus shaken from every thing but him and his righteousness, he never was awakened, but is dead to this day; he has never had ears to hear the word of God; he never had eyes to see, but is blind; he has no heart to understand; but with all his sobriety, peace, and good hopes, with all his self-made comforts, he is in the utmost danger and peril, and, like the bones without life, dead to God and very dry.

There was yet another remarkable effect of Ezekiel's preaching; the bones came to their proper place,

place, every bone to his bone. This is to teach us, that the gospel brings those together that were at the greatest distance, and unites even such as before were enemies ; it causes the greatest order and decency, and sets every thing in its proper place. He adds, " the sinews and the flesh came upon the bones, and the skin covered them above, but there was no breath in them." In this state are many, many souls, and whole congregations and churches. They have heard the preaching of the gospel, and felt somewhat of the power of the word of God ; they have got good rules, orders, and articles of religion, like sinews, to bind them together, and have their morality, like a fine skin, over all—but there is no life in them. They are utter strangers to the voice of the blood of sprinkling within, have not yet received the Holy Ghost, nor know that Christ liveth in them. All their religion is the form of christianity, but they have not the power. O let every one ask his heart, " Is it not so with me ?" I will not, I dare not say this of all, but of many it is certainly true ; they have a good church, good laws, good rules and doctrines, appear like men and children of God, but after all, what our Saviour said once to a young man, may be said to them, " Yet lackest thou one thing." Thou hast a good form, perhaps, can boast of the antiquity, orthodoxy, or purity of thy church, and tell what good works thou hast done, how often fasted and prayed, how charitable and devout, how strict in thy duties, " but there is no life in thee," so that thou art a stranger to the Lamb in thy heart, or unacquainted with his love inwardly ; thou art, with all thy doings, like a dead branch and dry bones, yea, thou art very dry.

Now

Now when Ezekiel saw that the sinews had knit bone to bone, and the flesh and skin covered them and made them in the form and fashion of men, but yet dead, the Lord bid him prophecy to the winds, and say to them in the name of the Lord God, that they might breathe upon the dry bones and make them live, and he did so as he was commanded, and breath entered into them, and they stood up and lived, and became an army of men.

Here ministers may learn a weighty lesson; they may bring people together and make articles, creeds, and whatever else they please, to bind them in one body; they may teach them to cover themselves with what other covering they please, and when they have done all it will be like a body without the soul, till God breathes upon them, and gives them life. Let them therefore speak to the wind, to the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, that he may inspire the souls and make them live; for without his immediate aid all our labour is in vain. We do not pray before our discourses because that has been the long received custom, or because others have done it, but because we would implore the north and south wind to blow upon the church, which is God's garden, that the spices may flow out: Or, in plain words, to beseech our Saviour to quicken the hearts of all who hear, that they may be converted and saved. We have not many instances in the Testament of the apostles using prayer before or after their preaching, but generally they delivered their errands and divine messages, and went their way; but now prayer is almost every where in use, before and after sermons; and when he that ministers, and they who hear, feel the want of the Holy Spirit, it has its great use and blessing, for then they

ask in faith, and receive the presence of the Lord, which blesses every meeting, and is felt by all the faithful, to their great joy and comfort. Alas ! how cold is that assembly where Jesus is not ! And how dead and dry that meeting where he does not preside ! As of old the camp rested when the cloud and pillar rested, and went forward when that moved before them, so is it now. Let the Shekinah, the glory, be absent, and none go forward, all stops and is at a stand, but let the Lord arise, and his spirit move before, and all goes on after him happily. Also, as it is with the church of God in general, so is it with every child of God in particular ; for till a soul has found our Saviour, and is made alive by him, he remains poor, and dead, and impotent, when He, the Sun of righteousness, arises upon him with healing in his wings, and when his Spirit brings the glad news, " Live, thy sins are forgiven thee ! " then he can stand up and be happy ; from that moment he becomes a new man, and lives a new life ; he lives the life of the Son of God, and shall live for ever.

This is what the Lord aims at in the text, " I will put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live."

I wonder exceedingly how some men can read the scripture constantly, and yet deny altogether the gift of the Holy Spirit ; for there is scarce any prophet that has not mentioned the promise of him ; nor can we hardly open the New Testament but we find Jesus and all his servants confirming the blessed doctrine. How frequently is it repeated, " The Holy Ghost shall come. He shall be in you. He shall abide with you for ever. He will lead you into all truth. Your heavenly Father will give his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. Ye shall receive the

the Holy Ghost?" And indeed all are exempted from being children of God and Christ's disciples, who have him not in their hearts. See Rom. viii. 9. 1 John v. 12. 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

Without him all are dead to God while they live, and their works are dead works, and do not please the living God. A man who has not Christ in him, and who was never made alive by his breath, and by the word of his mouth, is no real christian; he may be called so, and may have dreamed and fancied he was a christian indeed, but he is one of that number "who have a name to live but are dead." "He that hath the Son hath life, saith the scripture, but he that hath not the Son hath not life." If he has not come to our Saviour and been pardoned by him, and fed upon his flesh and blood by a living faith, his estate is explained by Jesus himself, "He has no life in him." The same gracious Lord God who poured out his Holy Spirit upon the prophets and fathers, and taught them to see afar off the redemption by our Saviour, and to believe on him, and depend upon his death to their salvation; the same Lord deals in like manner graciously by us now, and bestows on us the same faith, the same gift of grace, and the same Spirit, and by which only we can possibly become heirs of the glory to come, or believe to eternal life. It is the Holy Ghost that quickens those who come to, or believe in Jesus. He opens the eyes and lets men see their sin, and he unstops the ears that they may hear the voice, the soft still voice of the Son of man, and live. He awakes them from their graves, and beds of carnal security, and directs them to Christ, that they may have life: And though he could do all this without using preachers or ministers at all, and sometimes has done so, yet generally, "it has pleased God

God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." He makes himself witnesses in all ages, and these he sets in his church to testify of him, and to set to their seal that God is true, and his words true and faithful. Should a bewildered soul enquire of them of the certainty of their doctrine, they can answer, "We are witnesses of these things;" we have been lost, but are now found, we have been dead, but are alive again, and shall live, because Jesus is our life for evermore.

The Israelites had been dejected, and thought, "as for us, we are cut off, and God has cast us away, we have no hope," therefore was Ezekiel shewn this vision, and ordered to say to that poor disconsolate house of Israel, that though there was no more likelihood of their deliverance than of the resurrection of dry bones, yet would God surely visit them, and bring them up out of their graves, that is, the low estate in which they were like men dead and buried, "then will I put my Spirit in you, and you shall live, saith the Lord God!"

In this way a poor troubled sinner may think to himself, I am dead and like one gone down to the pit; my hope lessens, and my heart and soul is dead and heavy to the last degree; I am afraid I am gone too far to be saved, and that, for my part, I am cut off as a dry branch and withered, and fit for nothing but to be cast into the fire. Such thoughts often occur, where a person gets awakened and is much alone, or who has not understood, though they were dead, who believe in Jesus, yet they shall live. Here the gospel is of the utmost weight and importance, it is of real service, and sets before the soul ready to perish a crucified Saviour, a dying and bleeding Lamb, the sight of which revives the heart, and begins a new and everlasting life. The
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feet of them who bring the glad tidings are beautiful to such, for of them they hear that "the dry bones can live." In this respect, therefore, we must admire the wisdom of our dear Saviour, in sending men with the gospel rather than angels; for though many may think, If I could have an angel appear to me and tell me of salvation, it would at once satisfy me; yet in great measure such, who have so thought, had their wishes been granted, would be mistaken; for should an angel or blessed spirit announce the death and merits of our Saviour, in and declare his love and mercy, it is easy for a soul convinced of sin to think, Alas! thou art an angel, and one who kept his first estate, thou hast never sinned, nor been disobedient, nor felt a heart cold and dead like mine, to thee therefore it may be right and just to believe so well of the Redeemer, but I am a sinner, a poor, lost, helpless, and dead sinner, and have no right to venture to the Saviour like thee. In this case, I say, a minister of Christ can be of more use than a vision of angels, for he is a witness of the grace and pardon of God our Saviour; he was once in the same deep mire and clay, and convinced of his sad condition by nature, but found mercy and everlasting life in the wounds of Jesus Christ: But there is a greater witness than men or angels, and that is the Holy Spirit, who is the "Lord and Giver of life, and who beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God." He will not commit this most important and weightiest work to any minister, however trusty or faithful, nor to any of the most dear angels, but is himself the ascertainer and witness of our adoption and sonship, that we need not be left to reason and question of the truth of an angelical vision, or be at the uncertainty of the message of a man, or be exposed to doubt

doubt and fear in their absence, supposing we could be well persuaded of their veracity and faithfulness; but we have the Spirit of truth with us, who cannot lie, and whose conviction in the heart is more solid and sure than if all heaven was opened, and every angel assured us of our part in Christ; yea, more solid and certain than if all the prophets, apostles, martyrs, and witnesses of every age stood before us, and preached to us how we were beloved of God, and confessed by our Saviour, in presence of all his holy angels. This witness remains, when visions cease, when we do not dream blessed dreams any more, when preaching is over, and time is no longer. "He will abide with us for ever. He will never leave or forsake us," and in our last moments, when our strength fails, and our friends and nearest relations can comfort us no more, then he will continue "the faithful and true witness," in whom, till then, we live in peace here, and shall live to all eternity, through the death of Jesus, who is "the resurrection and the life." To whom be glory and thanksgiving for evermore. Amen.

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